

Niger seeks to end cycle of hunger

IRIN News

Agricultural transformation is part of Niger's bid to end chronic food scarcity NIAMEY, 5 April 2013 (IRIN) - Niger is seeking to end its chronic food shortages through an ambitious agricultural transformation plan - but the plan will have to meet the demands of a fast-growing population living in a mostly desert country that also faces threats to its security.

When he came to power in 2011, President Issoufou Mahamadou said: "As evidenced in the last election, our people have gained political freedom; now it remains to attain freedom from hunger." Some 6.4 million Nigeriens faced hunger during the 2011-2012 Sahel food crisis.

A year later, Mahamadou's government launched the so-called 3N Initiative - Les Nigériens Nourissent les Nigériens [Nigeriens Feeding Nigeriens] - a broad strategy touching on food, the environment, energy and industrial transformation, estimated to cost \$2 billion in the initial 2012-2015 phase of the project.

Humanitarian groups active in Niger point out the proactive approach taken by the new administration aims to combat both food insecurity and malnutrition, heralding it as an example to other crisis-prone Sahel countries.

Mahamadou's predecessor, Mamadou Tandja, who was ousted in a February 2010 coup, had come under intense criticism over his handling of food crises in the 2000s. Some critics said he refused to accept that there were serious food shortages due to pride and a deep mistrust of NGOs.

"Niger faces drought once in every two years. Even in a good year, there is a part of the population that still remains vulnerable. Drought is the main threat to agriculture in our country. It's responsible for 80 percent of losses in terms of agricultural output," said Amadou Allahoury Diallo, the high commissioner of the 3N Initiative.

A tall order

Only 12 percent of Niger's territory can sustain farming. But with a growth rate of 3.3 percent, it has one of the world's fastest growing populations. The population doubled between 1988 and 2010, rising from around seven million to some 15 million, according to official statistics. Just 1 percent of the territory - in the extreme west - receives more than 600mm of rain per year.

"The output from the 3-4 months of the rainy season is what feeds the population for the 12 months of the year. This should change," Diallo told IRIN. "Eighty percent of the population depends on agriculture. We have no choice but to develop agriculture."

Some observers say it will be impossible for Niger to attain food security given the harsh climate, poverty and population pressure. The 3N Initiative's to-do list ranges from introducing modern technology and equipping farmers with better seeds and implements to improving agricultural financing and market management.

The latest scheme is hardly unprecedented; previous Nigerien governments initiated self-sustenance strategies. However, Diallo argued that strong political will by Mahamadou's administration and better government coordination set the 3N initiative apart from its precursors.

“In the past, food security was spearheaded by development partners rather than the ruling party, and each ministry worked with different partners. There was no centralized leadership,” he noted.

Niger fell from growing enough food, and even being an exporter of cereals, in the 1960s, to a state of chronic shortages due to recurrent droughts that became more frequent in the last decade.

Locust invasions, unstable food prices and political instability have also gnawed away at the country’s food security. In Niger - and across much of the Sahel - staple cereal prices are above the five-year average. Prices of millet, the staple for Nigerien households, is at 30 percent above the five-year average, said the Famine Early Warning System Network, attributing the rise to strong demand by institutions and other private buyers.

“Good harvests do not necessarily mean food security. There is the question of accessibility. Poor families spend much of their income on buying food, and when the prices go up they suffer a huge impact,” said Wim Fransen, the Niger head of office for the European Commission’s humanitarian aid arm (ECHO).

“There should be a diversification and improvement of food production, management of natural resources, especially water, and an improvement the market system for better food distribution,” said Vincenzo Galastro, the International Fund for Agricultural Development’s programme manager for West and Central Africa.

“The Niger government has made food security a priority. We think it’s a very positive step,” he added.

Durability

But Niger has also had to respond to the crisis in neighbouring Mali, sending troops there as part of a West African stabilization force and stepping up internal security - moves with budgetary repercussions on its food security strategy.

“The government had pledged to use most of the resources from uranium and oil [receipts] to finance the agricultural sector. Unfortunately, Niger also faces insecurity problems owing to the Mali crisis, which diverted some of the resources to security,” said Diallo. “Insecurity and food security are the government’s main priorities.”

As with Niger’s previous strategies, the 3N Initiative could last only as long as the regime that created it, but Diallo said the government was working on legislation to ensure the self-sustenance aims are spared the vagaries of politics.

“We are going to develop an agriculture policy to be adopted as a law that would be enforceable even after this government,” he said.

The Food and Agriculture Organization representative in Niger, Aboubakar Doualé Waïss, argued that food security is an unavoidable issue for any government in the Sahel, meaning Mahamdaou’s involvement in the 3N Initiative would not have to limit the programme to the duration of his administration.

“There must be a strong engagement at the highest level of government. Moreover, it’s one of the policies for which the president was elected. It’s natural that he be at the heart of his strategy,” Waïss told IRIN.

“We are convinced that this programme will continue under whatever name it will be given. In any Sahel country, food security is vital. Whoever comes to power, food and nutritional security will remain part of their problem.”